

Fifth Summit of the Americas: Securing Our Citizens' Future

Once every three to four years, the leaders of the 34 democratically elected nations of the western hemisphere convene to discuss important issues that affect the lives of our citizens. On April 17-19, the Fifth Summit of the Americas will be held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. President Obama will be there to listen to the region's concerns, engage the region's leaders, and participate in an active and productive dialogue. The President, as the representative of the American people, will work with his counterparts to address key regional priorities that will lead to benefits for all peoples of the Americas.

At this Summit, leaders of the hemisphere will focus on human prosperity, energy security, and environmental sustainability. Because of the inter-related nature of these issues which affect all our countries, it will take a coordinated effort among partner nations over the coming years to address our common challenges. We will also strive to ensure that policies developed at the Summit protect the gains the region has made in recent years in economic growth and reducing poverty. Finally, we are heading to this Summit in Trinidad with a deep sense of responsibility to future generations and their well being.

Throughout its 15 year history, the Summit process has produced policies and programs that have directly benefited the lives of people all over this hemisphere. The following stories reflect how some of these efforts have improved the quality of life for millions.

1994



1998



2001



2005



STORIES FROM



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United States Helps Fight HIV/AIDS in Latin America

EFFORTS ADVANCE THE HIV/AIDS
SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS MANDATE

08 September 2008

Throughout the Americas, the United States builds HIV/AIDS treatment centers and works to stop transmission of the disease to newborns and to educate young adults about prevention.

Since 2001, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has spent more than \$552 million to carry out activities under the “Three Ones Initiative.” The initiative was created at the 2005 Summit of the Americas to ensure that Western Hemisphere countries have an HIV/AIDS coordination authority, a strategy to address the disease and a system to monitor its prevalence and patient treatment.

“Our ambition is greater than our capacity; our health system has not developed to the extent that it can appropriately respond to HIV/AIDS,” Guyana’s minister of health, Leslie Ramsammy, told America.gov. The United States works to fill the gaps in the efforts by Guyana and other Western Hemisphere countries to reduce HIV/AIDS.

The United States’ primary tool is the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). “PEPFAR has worked with Guyana to integrate many initiatives into our national programs; if PEPFAR were to walk away, we would continue them,” Ramsammy said.

PEPFAR, which initially committed \$15 billion for AIDS-related work for five years, recently was extended through 2014 with \$48 billion more authorized.

PEPFAR helps countries with the highest HIV infection levels, including Haiti and Guyana, where HIV/AIDS is a leading cause of death among people of working age. (These countries and 13 others collectively have half of HIV infections worldwide.)

Under PEPFAR, which is locally managed by USAID, Guyana received roughly \$82 million and Haiti received \$220 million from 2004 to 2007.



Hope

“We hope to empower them so that they may see the dawning of a new day,”

health

self-esteem empower

GUYANA

Guyana has the second-highest HIV rate in Latin America and the Caribbean, but the situation is improving. Ramsammy said Guyana went from having zero to 2,500 persons receiving anti-retroviral treatment from 2004 to 2007. A few years ago, it had only one treatment center, and today it has 14. The number of Guyanan clinics that work to prevent mother-to-child transmission has increased 14-fold since 2004.

Success is attributed in part to the government's engagement with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the vibrant Guyanese private sector. NGOs use USAID grants for prevention, treatment and care in their communities. USAID also supports the steps that private companies take to decrease stigmatization and discrimination against those infected by promoting prevention and counseling in the workplace.

Dmitri Nicholson, from the charity Youth Challenge Guyana, said USAID money allows the organization to reach remote areas and provide more comprehensive psychological support to vulnerable children and their parents.

Alex Presaud, 29, is a volunteer who became involved after participating in a Youth Challenge Guyana prevention program. "Doing community outreach to villages—from house to house, to people of all ages—has improved my self-esteem and allowed me to make a difference in the lives of teenagers," he said.

Guyana Responsible Parenthood Association is another USAID-supported organization that provides HIV testing, treatment and counseling. Its director, Frederick Cox, said that, with the help of USAID, the organization teaches 40 HIV-positive individuals about hygiene, nutrition and proper medication routines. "We hope to empower them so that they may see the dawning of a new day," he said.

Caring for those living with HIV/AIDS is a priority for organizations such as Hope for All and Love and Faith. Through USAID grants, they have expanded services and hired paid staff, after they had previously relied on volunteers. One particularly valuable service offered is

"Doing community outreach to villages has improved my self-esteem and allowed me to make a difference in the lives of teenagers."

home-based care. Staffers visit people living with HIV/AIDS to provide support and even academic help to their children. The groups also give skills classes—focusing on sewing and gardening—to help patients make a living.

Nikia (who withheld her full name), a Hope for All client, told America.gov that since joining the program, she looks at life differently because she knows help exists. The home-based-care officer takes "time to come and visit me and encourage me to live," said Nikia.

HAITI

Because Haiti has the largest number of people living with HIV in the Americas, it is not difficult to imagine local charities being overwhelmed. But Marlene Adrien, HIV/AIDS program coordinator for the nonprofit World Concern, outside of Port-au-Prince, said USAID allows her group to reach more young people and their parents than she ever thought possible.

Adrien said "behavioral change" initiatives, which help youth avoid risky behavior that would make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, are particularly successful. World Concern hosted a ceremony earlier this year in which 300 young people pledged abstinence. Also this year, the group hosted drawing and acting contests to engage youth.

Claire (who withheld her real name), 15, used to skip school and practice promiscuous sexual behavior. Her stepmother, after undergoing her own AIDS awareness program, approached Bertha, an Abstinence and Being Faithful for Youth promoter, about Claire.

Bertha learned that Claire might be seeking love outside the home because she lacked affection from her parents. Counseling helped Claire and her parents change. Claire has committed to a new, safer lifestyle.

In the spirit of the summit's "Three Ones Initiative," the United States will continue to fight against HIV/AIDS to ensure the health and prosperity of Latin America's future generations.

Citizen Involvement in Summit of the Americas Process Expanding

U.S.-BACKED MEETING IN MIAMI HIGHLIGHTS
PRIORITIES FOR 2009 SUMMIT

02 May 2008

Citizen involvement is increasing in the Summit of the Americas process, which focuses on promoting security and economic prosperity in the Western Hemisphere, several civil society officials tell America.gov.

For example, about 120 representatives of civil society organizations from more than 30 countries in the Americas participated in a May 1-2 Civil Society Hemispheric Forum in Miami.

The event was hosted by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the government of Trinidad and Tobago and supported by the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Inter-American Foundation and the nongovernmental group the Open Society Institute. Participants included groups promoting youth, indigenous populations, the physically challenged, people of African descent living in the Americas and representatives of academia.

Recommendations generated at the Miami event will be presented for inclusion in a “Declaration of Commitment” at the fifth Summit of the Americas, to be held in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009. The 2009 summit theme is “Securing Our Citizens’ Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability.”



Involve

“...to address these problems effectively, we need to be challenged as governments—to spur change and to force us to consider new approaches,”

rights

common agenda

VIEWS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Racquel Smith, who represented the Canadian Foundation for the Americas at the Miami meeting, says citizens need to know what priorities their governments are setting for the summit, a meeting of the 34 leaders of the region's democratic nations. Events such as the Miami meeting allow citizen groups to "partner in helping to advance" these priorities, said Smith, who is a project manager for her Ottawa-based organization.

Smith said "things have come a long way" in the last 10 years in keeping citizen groups involved in the summit process. Prior to that time, she said, citizens learned what issues governments cited as their priorities through "sideline consultations." But "to the credit of the summit organizers, they have really started a process of consultation with civil society" on what themes should be included for the Trinidad and Tobago agenda, she said.

Such consultation, Smith said, "puts a face on civil society" by allowing citizen groups not only to listen to summit themes, but also to contribute ideas for the summit plan of action, which sets the broad objectives for hemispheric leaders to enhance democracy and human rights, reduce poverty and violent crime, promote economic growth and competitiveness and encourage energy security and sustainable development.

Another participant in the Miami meeting, Bianca Cappellini, a project manager for the Connecticut-based Lawyers Without Borders, said that her previous

perception of the summit process was that the hemisphere's governments set the region's priorities with minimal input from civil society. The Miami meeting allowed civil society groups to "collaborate" on what the summit agenda should include, she said.

Jadir Hernandez, chairman of the Miami-based Civil Rural Development Project, said citizen involvement in the summit has become even more important as self-styled "populist" left-wing leaders in Venezuela and Bolivia amass power and align with dictatorial regimes in Iran and Syria.

Giving citizens a chance to have their social and economic needs reflected in the summit process promotes democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, said Hernandez, who also participated in the Miami meeting.

Andrea Sanhueza, executive director of Corporación Participa in Chile, said her group works to inform citizens about the summit process and its importance regarding the decisions government leaders make on public policy.

Sanhueza told America.gov that U.S. citizens are more able to hold their elected leaders accountable to summit commitments than are citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean, where "people are not very aware" of the summit process.

Sanhueza's organization helps coordinate the Active Democracy Network, composed of 24 civil society organizations in the Americas. The network assesses the extent to which governments fulfill their promises

on such issues as access to public information, freedom of expression, empowerment of local governments and decentralization and support for civil society participation in governance.

Another nongovernmental group promoting citizen involvement in the summit process is the Washington-based Partners of the Americas. The group's Center for Civil Society is involved in such issues as judicial reform, strengthening of local government, anti-corruption efforts and transparency.

U.S. OFFICIAL ADDRESSES SUMMIT GOALS

In citing the need for civil society's involvement in summit decisions, Hector Morales, U.S. permanent representative to the OAS, said May 1 at the Miami meeting that "in today's world, the problems confronting states are too complex even for the most powerful states to tackle alone."

Morales, also the U.S. national summit coordinator, said that "to address these problems effectively, we need to be challenged as governments—to spur change and to force us to consider new approaches—individually and collectively."

Morales said the 2009 summit will allow the U.S. administration, working with the OAS and the "strong leadership" of Trinidad and Tobago, "to build on summit successes and develop bold initiatives that deliver concrete, measurable results in support of our common hemispheric agenda."

Microloans Enable Many Bolivians to Become Entrepreneurs

MICROFINANCE IS FASTEST-GROWING
BUSINESS IN SOUTH AMERICA'S POOREST
COUNTRY AND ADDRESSES SUMMIT PRIORITY

02 September 2008

Bolivia, the poorest country in South America, has devised a system of microfinance lending that offers poor, often illiterate people the chance to become self-sustaining entrepreneurs.

One such entrepreneur is Flora Callisaya, a 38-year-old single mother of three boys aged 12, 14, and 18. The mother and her boys used to live with Callisaya's parents as she struggled to support her family. She received her first loan of \$17 from the Pro Mujer microfinance institution (MFI), which requires its members to participate in a savings program.


Callisaya used her initial loan to buy materials for a printing business. From that modest beginning, she expanded her enterprise to include a photography studio and dishware and gift boxes that she sells in the market. Her loan now is \$1,122.

Thanks to Pro Mujer's mandatory savings program, Callisaya has bought her own land and a house. She has served as president of the communal bank that the MFI helped organize.

"Pro Mujer is like school for us. Here we can see each other, have fun, relax and learn. For us Pro Mujer is a place we can be together," Callisaya said, according to the Pro Mujer Web site.

Inter-American Development Bank seed financing has played an important role in the Bolivian and similar microfinance systems throughout the region.

"Microfinance lending is the fastest growing and most profitable sector of the Bolivian economy for the past quarter century," said Sandra Darville of IDB. "Loan repayment rate is very high. If they want another loan, they have to repay the first one."



"Microfinance lending is the fastest growing and most profitable sector of the Bolivian economy for the past quarter century,"

benefits

sustainable livelihood

Bolivia seized and redistributed land, nationalized mines and natural gas reserves and imposed exchange rate and price controls from the 1950s to the 1980s with the aim of spurring economic growth, but to little avail.

Then, in the 1980s, Bolivia reversed course and embraced market-based reforms—lifting price controls, encouraging foreign trade, selling off state enterprises and closing unprofitable mines. Those measures stabilized the economy but did not induce economic growth. Poverty remained high, and the rural poor migrated to the cities in search of better economic prospects. Witness the growth of El Alto, a city near the capital, La Paz, from a population of 100,000 to more than 1 million over 15 years.

On the streets of El Alto, as well as other Bolivian cities, vendors sell fruits, vegetables, televisions, refrigerators and clothing. These street businesses are part of the “informal” economy, which provides the livelihood for more than 60 percent of the population.

To enable laid-off miners, landless peasants and others of the impoverished underclass to support themselves, donor countries, charities and the Bolivian government developed ways of identifying prospective entrepreneurs and loaning them small sums of money to launch businesses. Thus was born the microfinance industry, and the collapse of the myth that poor, illiterate people were poor credit risks. The default rate on microloans is less than 5 percent.

About 1 million Bolivians have taken out microloans from about 20 MFIs. Throughout the Latin America and Caribbean region, about 8 million people have taken out microloans, amounting to about \$9 billion.

The 2004 Special Summit of the Americas affirmed its support for IDB lending through the banking system to micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises. A Summit statement praised IDB for “striving to benefit all of the countries that participate in the Summit of the Americas process.”

“The key to microfinance is having methodology that distinguishes legitimate business people from would-be beggars.”

Referring to Bolivian microloan recipients, the IDB’s Sergio Navajas said, “These people are very, very poor, but they have viable businesses. The key to microfinance is having methodology that distinguishes legitimate business people from would-be beggars.”

“MFIs are part of the financial system,” Darville said. “Certainly, they are sustainable. They have grown, taking deposits, offering checking accounts. Some issue bonds and shares. Increasingly, they are part of the domestic and international capital markets. [Credit rating company] Standard and Poor’s has begun rating them for their credit risk.”

The microfinance lenders form close ties with borrowers, getting to know them and their communities. Often loans are extended to groups, creating “moral collateral” in the absence of material assets. If one person defaults on a loan, then the other members of the group are responsible for repayment. The social network minimizes the default rate.

The interest rates on microloans in Bolivia have fallen from around 60 percent a year in the 1990s to 19 percent now, according to Navajas. As business people have seen that microfinance is a viable service industry, competition has grown and lowered the cost of borrowing, he said.

Most of the microloan recipients are women—by coincidence rather than design, according to Darville, although some MFIs deal exclusively with women. The reason that women constitute the majority of the borrowers is that most microfinance loans go for retail businesses, such as small grocery stores, bakeries, handicrafts, restaurants and market stalls, where women predominate.

Remittances Bring Hope to Many Latin American Families

U.S. REMITTANCES TO LATIN AMERICA ARE
DOWN, BUT SO ARE SENDING COSTS THANKS
TO AN INITIATIVE OF THE SUMMIT OF THE
AMERICAS

24 February 2009

Remittance. For many Latin American families, it is a word full of hope and uncertainty. It refers to money sent home, often for food, clothing, books, school uniforms and medicines—money that many fear will disappear as the global economy slows.

All over Latin America, families wait for money that relatives send from other countries, principally from the United States, to supplement their income. Statistics from the World Bank and the Mexico Central Bank report that, in Mexico alone, foreign remittances are second only to the oil industry for share of the national income. Despite a global economy in recession, families in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and other countries with large communities in the United States continue to hold on to the promise that foreign remittances will supplement their incomes.

The United States recognizes the importance of remittances and has worked successfully to lower the costs of the transactions. At the conclusion of the Summit of Americas held in Mexico in 2004, the U.S. government pledged to continue efforts to reduce the cost of sending remittances so that more money would be received by families rather than be absorbed in dispatching the funds. In 2000, according to World Bank figures, 15 percent, or \$49, of a \$300–\$350 remittance was absorbed by transaction costs. Between 2000 and 2004, that percentage was halved for remittances sent from the United States. And in 2008, the cost of remittances from the United States dropped further, from 7.5 percent to 4.5 percent, according to the World Bank.



Enable

“The United States recognizes the importance of remittances and has worked successfully to lower the costs of the transactions.”

family

cooperation community

Manuel Orozco, a senior associate in the Remittances and Development Program at the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington public policy group, said there will be a decline in overall remittances in 2009, but that the drop off is “relative.” Unemployment in certain industries, such as construction and service businesses, and migrant movement may harm one-third of people receiving remittances, according to Orozco.

Orozco acknowledges U.S. government assistance in facilitating the flow of remittances through programs by the U.S. Treasury, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and cooperative measures with the Mexico Central Bank. Programs in Mexico with USAID assistance encourage financial literacy so recipient families learn how to manage the money received.

The Inter-American Foundation, an independent U.S. government agency, works with grass-roots programs to plan economic development projects paid for by the money received from remittances.

The process of transferring money has evolved. Families in Latin America typically can access Internet transfers, draw money directly from automated teller machines and receive money wired from traditional services, such as Western Union. Particularly in countries including Mexico, Paraguay and El Salvador, there has been an increase in the variety of channels through which remittances flow.

The U.S. Treasury has worked in Guatemala City with the World Bank to improve efficiency and competitiveness in the Guatemalan remittance market. USAID partners

with the World Council of Credit Unions to strengthen credit unions and remittance services. And USAID has established a successful alliance with Mexico’s 4 por 1 program, which unites federal, state and local governments with Western Union to fund projects that benefit communities where many workers have left for better jobs in the United States.

A WOMAN’S ISSUE

Orozco stressed that two-thirds of all recipients of foreign remittances are women. Remittance money received is normally spent on food and clothing, education or medicine. Despite their own financial stress, women recipients worry about their loved ones in the United States—particularly about their vulnerability to unemployment or homelessness.

“The Mexican people are remarkably resilient—they can withstand anything. They are not panicking ... but they are very worried,”

Sara Miller Llana, a journalist for the Christian Science Monitor in Mexico, said the drop in remittances from a record high in 2008 is having a detrimental affect on Latin American families. In the state of Michoacán, Mexico, families that typically received \$700 a month from their relatives in the United States in October 2008 today receive only \$100 a month.

Family remittances will continue to dwindle in coming months, according to the Mexico Central Bank. Llana said the downturn will hit hard in Mexico, where homes that had been under construction are standing unfinished.

Llana told America.gov that some Mexicans are trying to compensate by growing their own food in small plots. “The Mexican people are remarkably resilient—they can withstand anything. They are not panicking ... but they are very worried,” Llana said.

There also is the prospect of migrant workers returning home permanently from the United States, according to Llana. She said local municipal leaders in Michoacán, for instance, registered many returnees at the end of 2008 as returning residents. While Christmas holidays often bring workers home to their families, this year, 20,000 in Michoacán chose to remain after the holidays.

Social migration specialists argue that, even though some migrant workers in the United States are unemployed (migrant construction workers, for instance, have an unemployment level of 20 percent), some will move to new regions of the United States and find work that will allow them to continue sending money home.

When the 2009 Summit of the Americas convenes in Trinidad and Tobago in April, there likely will be new efforts for further cooperation in remittance policies and economic development in all of the Western Hemisphere.

Teaching the Teachers Helps Kids Read in Latin America

U.S. PRESIDENTIAL INITIATIVE IS ACHIEVEMENT
OF 2001 SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

11 August 2008

By improving the quality of education for teachers in several Latin American regions, a program is improving children's reading capabilities.

Centers of Excellence for Teacher Training (CETT) primarily trains teachers from schools in poor urban and rural areas to reach children who are less likely to attain literacy during their early primary school years. The intervention aims to break the cycle of poverty.


The program hopes to help countries throughout the hemisphere promote equal opportunity among their citizens and greater economic competitiveness in traditionally disadvantaged areas.

The centers in the Western Hemisphere have developed a comprehensive in-service teacher training program and trained more than 20,000 teachers to give 600,000 underprivileged students a better education.

The U.S. delegation proposed the CETT during the 2001 Summit of the Americas, pledging \$20 million for a four-year program. This pledge has been surpassed, with the program extended and additional funds given by U.S. Agency for International Development and the private sector, bringing the total contribution to date to \$53 million.

Activities are implemented through three regional centers based in Jamaica (English-speaking Caribbean Region), Honduras (Central America and Dominican Republic) and Peru (Andean Region).

CETT trains teachers with the most effective reading and writing teaching methods to improve student literacy in grades one through three. The centers have introduced international best practices for a more child-centered and interactive approach to teaching that has proven to increase children's learning.



*"I never expected that my students' results
would improve so much."*

literacy

equal opportunity

The ministries of education of many participating countries endorse CETT. In many cases, the centers offer the first formal training in literacy education to teachers and provide appropriate materials for schools that have minimal infrastructure and supplies.

Local pedagogical universities and institutions are organized into regional consortia where education specialists are trained so they, in turn, can provide training to participating elementary school teachers in a yearlong program. Trainers also visit teachers in their classrooms to provide ongoing coaching and support.

Natalia Alfaro and Blanca Franco are two CETT-trained teachers who teach first grade in the poorest urban areas of Lima, Peru.

For Alfaro, the training has resulted in a “methodological and strategic change.” She says that it is the new teaching techniques’ “focus on the child’s communication development” that helps her students “learn to read faster and better” than before.

Because this marginalized urban population has been saddled by low expectations, even CETT teachers have been surprised to discover how much their students can achieve.

“I never expected that my students’ results would improve so much. I thought that the results I had before were good, but when I started with the CETT program, all of my mental frameworks were changed,” said Alfaro.

She said that a more dynamic classroom helps to make reading more fun for students, and they stay in school and want to learn more.

Last year, CETT and Scholastic Inc. teamed up to provide participating schools with 118,885 books to fill classroom libraries. “These books are very important to optimize our students’ reading performance because they don’t have access to books at home,” said Franco.

“We’re close to our goal of achieving 60 percent of students reading above their grade level,”

“When my students finish their class work they can choose a book from our classroom library to read during their free time as a reward,” Alfaro said.

Both Alfaro and Franco point out that the supportive classroom environment that they have learned to promote helps students’ self-esteem and students speak more, write more and express themselves better at school and at home.

The CETT program is also improving parent involvement—often absent in underprivileged schools—through parent workshops, regular parent-teacher meetings and community-school events.

“We’re close to our goal of achieving 60 percent of students reading above their grade level,” said Joan Spencer-

Ernandez, Caribbean CETT testing and measurement specialist in the University of the West Indies.

According to Spencer-Ernandez, the Caribbean centers have trained 95 percent of teachers enrolled in the program to create a unified set of tests and classroom materials that are culturally relevant for the Caribbean region. The Caribbean centers propose that ministries of education and pedagogic colleges incorporate these standards to their methodologies and curricula.

In the Central American and Dominican Republic CETT, for example, trained teachers to validate all of the didactic guides, teaching materials and training modules that the technical teams develop to ensure that they meet the special needs of their students.

A recent qualitative study by JBS International, which provides evaluation technical support for the CETT project, reports that the training corps created by CETT is a force for change that did not exist before in most affected countries.

For instance, Alfaro and Franco are among 43 teachers in Peru whose performance qualifies them to receive further preparation as teacher trainers themselves. This will multiply the number of skilled teachers in the country.

“Teachers are recognizing that CETT training is contributing to their professional development; doors have opened for them,” said training coordinator for the Andean CETT, Danilo de la Cruz.

American Professor Finds, Preserves Ancient Mayan Murals

U.S. FUND FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION HELPS
RESTORE TREASURES AND SUPPORT SUMMIT OF
THE AMERICAS GOALS

06 March 2009

Indigenous art is smuggled. Private collectors buy from looters. Priceless relics vanish from archeological digs. Religious treasures are stolen from places of worship and sold abroad. Pockets are lined at the expense of cultural patrimony.

But the United States is committed to combating such crimes and preserving the cultural heritage of the developing world.

As a signatory to a 1970 U.N. convention on prohibiting cultural theft, the United States forbids imports of archaeological or ethnological material when theft has placed a nation's cultural heritage at risk.

In addition to the 1970 convention, the United States has bilateral agreements to preserve cultural artifacts with several countries, including seven in Central and South America.

At the 2004 Summit of the Americas, participating nations agreed to "support culture as it relates to the protection of a nation's heritage."

Since 2001, the United States Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation has provided more than \$13 million to some 500 projects in 120 countries. Projects in Central and South America and the Caribbean have benefited from \$2.3 million of this money. Among the projects the fund supports, two of the most noteworthy have been in Guatemala and help protect Mayan heritage.



Protect

"The project has "a historical and cosmological impact on the world,"

heritage

culture preservation

MAYAN TREASURE

Guatemala has received more than \$750,000 in grants from the fund, with the largest grant—\$575,000—awarded this year.

Guatemala's most recent award is the largest grant to a country in the Western Hemisphere. It targets a project in San Bartolo, in the eastern Petén region, that involves murals depicting the Mayan story of creation. Restoration of the murals and a Mayan temple is under way.

"The murals at San Bartolo constitute by far the most important corpus of painted scenes known from the Late Preclassic Maya period and are of unique cultural importance for both Guatemala and the region," said Martin Perschler, of the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation.

The preservation of the murals and protection of the site is the ongoing work of William Saturno, an archeology professor at Boston University in Massachusetts. Saturno discovered the murals in March 2001. Their preservation, the shoring up of walls of the room where they are located and the piecing together of broken fragments began in 2006, with an ambassador fund grant, and will continue this year with the large grant given to Guatemala.

Perschler credits Saturno's dedication for much of the success of the project.

"I'M NO INDIANA JONES"

The 2001 discovery mirrors a Hollywood movie script. Saturno literally stumbled upon it. "I'm a chubby guy from the Northeast ... I'm no Indiana Jones," he told America.gov.

Finding the murals was the result of a poorly planned trip — one that was supposed to be three hours long but resulted in a two-day ordeal without food and water. "I was just getting out of the sun," Saturno said, describing the day when he entered a tunnel leading into the mural room. Looters had dug a trench in search of pottery they could remove. Saturno, taking shelter, looked up expecting to see bats on the ceiling and, instead, saw portions of the now famous murals.

"This is the story from the beginning of time,"

Saturno said the Mayans often built on top of previously constructed sites. This is why the room of murals survived for 2,000 years before looters tunneled into it. The Mayans built a pyramid over the room of murals, sealing the murals with mud and filling the room with rubble. The murals had been unexposed to light and air for 2,000 years.

"There is nothing like it," Saturno said. The few previously known Mayan murals date from A.D. 800, nearly two centuries later than these, which depict the Mayan story of creation. The project has "a historical and cosmological impact on the world," Saturno said.

Experts have called this Preclassic Mayan subterranean complex the Mayan Sistine Chapel because it holds one of the most elaborate creation scenes depicted before the Classic Period. The corn god myth depicted on the mural—a Mayan god going to the underworld and reemerging with corn—has been depicted many times. But Saturno's find reveals that the story was around much earlier than the first century.

Shamans from a modern day Mayan community near Lake Tikal, Guatemala, recently visited Saturno. They suspect that the discovery was no coincidence and that Saturno, in a manner, descended to the "underworld" (the tunnel room) and reemerged with news, just like the ancient Mayan god in the creation story. "This is the story from the beginning of time," the shamans told Saturno: "It was your destiny to find the murals."